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ABSTRACT

Described here is a curricular effort to respond to the need for more adequate preparation of students in the areas of negotiating skills, cooperative efforts, and the nature of professional work. Successful cooperative and negotiative efforts require a high level of skills--skills that the isolated nature of our educational structure seldom develop. The arrangement described is the outcome of three successive quarters of development and experimentation in a foundations of education course. Students were asked to find, define, study, and report on some real problem in a real school or group of schools. The study required them to talk to students, parents, school teachers, administrators, and community organizations. Each report had to be produced by a randomly organized committee. The results have been that students get involved in issues typically handled by professionals in their work, and have lots of actual situations which call for cooperation and negotiation. (Author/JLB)

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What Students Don't Know About: Cooperation, Negotiation, Organizations.

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THE PROBLEM

During the past five years, I've been a government bureaucrat, grad student, parent of high school age children, and college professor. My experiences, and my professional studies, have convinced me that present education practices give students insufficient training in cooperative efforts, negotiating skills and the nature of professional work. As a college teacher, I determined to develop a curriculum in my education foundations class that dealt with these problems. My moderately successful effort may be of interest to other educators -- regardless of the age of their students, or their formal curriculum.

First, let me define more precisely the nature of the problem I perceived. The definition may help other educators to devise even better solutions of their own. Let's consider what "cooperation" implies. Successful cooperative efforts require a high level of skills. Each participant must be able to preceive something of the ability and motivation of the other participants. Then, each individual must assess his own ability and interests -- which may differ from the others. Next, the individuals must estimate what particular conduct of their own can stimulate the group towards the goals that is nearest the goal he aspires for himself. Sometimes, the individual may decide that no goal attainable by the group can satisfy him, and drop out -- or, sometimes, if he has talent, he may devise or sell a goal that is of maximum benefit to himself, and satisfies the group.

The whole effort at cooperation may be complicated by numerous variables. How strongly are the individual members of the group committed to the common task? What is holding it together? Money? Desire for achievement? Will the group dissolve? Will it stick together? Is the group comparatively homogenous in age and skills? If there is diversity, what is its character?

How long do they have to get the job done and what resources are available? What timetable shall be followed? How shall leadership be determined? How shall responsibilities be allocated?

Obviously, skills in group participation and management are precious. Obviously, students in school receive little training in these skills. Some--but not most--students are in extra-curricular activities. But even in such cases, school groups are usually age-homogenous, and often ability-homogenous. Such homogenity simplifies the problems of the participants--they all see things the same way, and this diminishes the learning potential of the experience. Of course, we know where group skills are best learned, and greatest demand--at work, politics, government, business, civic affairs. However, we cannot afford to permit the current cooperative incompetence of the young to persist.

Negotiating skills are also complex. They are somewhat akin to co-operation skills--but have distinct elements. Like cooperation, they require us to accurately assess our own needs and capabilities, and those of the persons or institutions around us. However, effective negotiation also requires a recognition that two (or more) persons engaged in negotiation have mutually conflicting and concurrent interests. This means each negotiator is the potential enemy and assistor of the other. An "enemy" cause he'll take you, if he can; an "assistor" cause without his help, there'll be no deal. This is a very difficult concept for students. They find the ambiguity involved difficult to accept. My observations are that they are prone to ignore one of the other of these two poles.

Negotiation is an essential component of adult life. True, it is more covert today than in the past. Supermarkets and department stores appear to have one price level, and simple bargaining is sometimes declasse. But negotiation has just changed its form. Any person hired for a significant job knows that some of the terms and conditions of the job--who he reports to, his pension rights, his hours of work, his moving expenses--are subject to negotiation. Indeed, the role of negotiation in contemporary life can be easily stated: the more important the issue being settled, and the greater the competency of the people involved, the greater the likelihood that there are

negotiable elements. As a society, we have stopped negotiating the prices of carrots, and negotiate about expensive homes, upper-level jobs, and medical services. The unfortunate thing is that this escalation has moved negotiations out of sight of the young. This has left them comparatively less trained at negotiating than earlier generations. Perhaps it made them less adept in politics and affairs. (For all the student unrest, what has happened? For half this much union unrest, what would have happened?)

But what skills do negotiators need? The ability to press friendly people so that their own personal interests are protected and advanced. The ability to work with unfriendly people -- as long as their own interests are protected or advanced in such enterprises. In sum, persistence, ingenuity, and a tolerance for ambiguity.

Student isolation from the world of life is a classic grievance. School diminishes the intergenerational contacts of the young. It brings them in touch with only a comparatively limited class of adults -- those with the taste and skills to attain teaching certification. It keeps them away from environments, e.g., work, in which money, power, and the problems of adults are the key issues. Putting it simply, school is not closely related to life.

I determined to design a class format which deals with these three problems. I felt that field work by the students, simulation and gaming all suggested means that might help do the job. The arrangement I will describe is the outcome of three successive quarters of development and experimentation.

COMPONENTS OF A SOLUTION

Because I believe my students (college sophomores, juniors and seniors) are rather unexperienced in affairs, I felt I had to offer some structure to the field work. Without it, I feared they'd either withdraw from actively exploring the out-of-school world, or go down sterile and unsatisfying dead ends. As a middle-of-the-road step, I asked them to find, define, study and report on some problem in a real school or group of schools. Their study required them to talk to students, parents, school teachers and administrators and (hopefully) community organizations. I emphasized that looking at book alone, or observing in school classroom would not do the job. They had to go out and ask questions of diverse adults.

I further emphasized that they should recurrently meet with me to discuss the thrust and progress of their efforts. The meetings were voluntary, and usually set up at the students' initiative. I warned them that, if the final written report missed the point, and they hadn't consulted with me during the study, they'd get a poor grade. If they had consulted, and I misadvised them, they were off the hook. If they produced a good report minus consultation, fine!

My students come from all over the Chicago area, and each report had to be produced by a committee. In my classes, the composition of the committees was first determined by chance. Who lived on the North side? etc. If the committees were not determined by this random practice, I would have insured that they were randomly organized by some other system. In other words, the the random nature of committee composition has much of the spirit of the real life model. The committees ranged from 3 to 6 in numbers.

I felt that just giving a single grade to each committee would not be fair to the differential efforts of the members. But how could I know who'd done more in each committee? Then, I decided that each committee could do its own per member marking. I would give a grade to each whole committee, and each committee, by (presumably) majority vote, would divide the grade up among its own members, on whatever basis they chose. I insisted that the committee agree, in writing about the division of the expected grade before they submitted the final paper to me. The divided final mark, translated into A's, B's, and so on, would go on the individual student's grade card. The schedule for delivery of papers allowed two weeks before the end of the term for class discussion and presentation of papers.

I outlined all these elements on a set of instruction sheets that ran about 800 words.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The students had not known of the project before they came to my class (advance communication with possible registrants is difficult on a big campus.) They reacted in a non-committal fashion, formed into committees and got started. Whenever a committee was over 5 or 6, I suggested a subdivision, because

coordination for that many people might be difficult. (I was right; 6 was hard to handle.)

My plan assumed that some committee-meeting times would take place away from class. The students found that arranging such common meeting times was difficult. (But that's life.) They became concerned with determining the focus of their studies. This was hard. If they didn't talk to me, they might go far off base. If they did not talk among themselves, they might simply accept my focus, not understand it among themselves, and get nothing done. If they focussed too soon, they might miss some interesting issues that developed as they went out to schools. If they focussed too late, they'd never get the job done.

Mechanics became a lot of the task. Could they get permission to interview the principal? Where could they find data about the number of poor people in a neighborhood? What appointment times were feasible? How could they get copies of a questionnaire reproduced? Where and when does the school board meet? How do we get in touch with our fellow committee members?

They became involved as assessing the responsibility of their co-members. Committees saw that attendance at their meetings was spotty. They wondered how the final product would be integrated if some of the contributors had not participated in the planning. When some students discussed this with me, I suggested they remind the absentees that, someday, grades would be distributed by the committee. Generally, these reminders were issued in the presence of the other committee members, and after group consultation.

On our campus, students can withdraw from courses up till the last week--and only lose their own time. This affected the character of the operation. Some students withdrew, at different stages, because they wanted out. Others, sometimes, just transferred to different, more congenial committees. But the later you withdrew, the more time and work you had wasted.

I'm convinced that the biggest difficulty for the students, was seeking out and interviewing adults whom they did not know. I'd estimate that half to two-thirds of the students actually did such stranger-interviewing. Others

would simply interview teachers they'd known from high school, or relatives, or friends of their parents. The strangers they reached included school superintendents, principals, newspaper reporters, parents' organization leaders, representatives of anti-poverty organizations, school board members, teacher union representatives, teachers, guidance counsellors, and so on. On the whole, the students were favorably impressed with the adult world they met -- though there were conspicuous exceptions. They discovered that things were a little more open than they realized, though their own persistence was important. (One student had to approach three separate, successive schools before she found one that was open and with an interesting problem.)

They turned up all kinds of slices of life. One became excited by the fight being waged by a school superintendent to keep his district interracial. Another discovered that the pupil placement department in a large high school was largely going through the motions. One team found an (apparently) public report on a school instructional TV -- but had the evaluation section torn out by the program administrators before they could study it. A student observed how a school was going about integrating its retarded pupils into the regular program -- and pre and post-tested the normal pupils affected by the integration. One report described the paddling administered to black students by a black policeman in a ghetto high school; the student witnessed the paddling, and interviewed both the policeman and the victim. (All concerned thought it was a sound discipline tactic.) One survey of high school students' drug use was taken without the permission of the school administrators (it showed a much a higher rate of use than the administrators estimated in interviews).

Planning the final report posed unaccustomed problems. Work had to be allocated -- though, usually, each student prepared and typed his own segment. Still, an over-all introduction and conclusion were required. Some of the papers also had statistics that were prepared and presented in common tables. Planning work completion was different from the usual class, where the deadline was the end of the term. Here, the committee had to have a

deadline that was in advance of mine, so each member could assess each others' work -- after all, they all were going to suffer or gain from each others' good or bad jobs.

As I suggested, the division of grades among the members of each committee was a question of varying intensity. Some small, homogenous committees comfortably assumed an even split and stayed with it all the way through. But the students' commitments to their responsibilities (inevitably) varied. Some were afraid of interviewing. Others wanted to maintain a high average for grad school. Others had heavy obligations in other courses. And, inevitably, there was the question of how much weight to give to excuses for frequent absences or skimpy work. All these distinctions affected the attitude of committee members towards the division of grades.

I suspect it was one cause for drop-outs; committee members pushed-out non-participants. Also, committee members (sometimes after talking with me) raised the issue of grades as a pressure device on poor attenders. But let me describe the contrasting bargaining pattern on grades followed within two 5-member committees.

In committee X, the subject of grades was raised at an early stage -- when one member proposed they all commit themselves to an even division. The committee refused, and left the matter open for later determination. Near the end of the term, they determined to reopen the issue -- since about $\frac{1}{2}$ of the work had been done, and people wanted to know where they stood. After about an hour's discussion, they agreed that each committee member should write down, on a piece of paper, the grade that he believed that each committee member should receive, including himself. The paper would be unsigned. The papers were pooled by the group. It seemed that there was an approximate consensus between the members that some had done A work, some B, and one D. They then assumed that the finished paper would earn a B, and determined the percentage of that grade each member was entitled to earn the appropriate grade. (This was 22-1/3%, 22-1/3%, 16-2/3%, 16-2/3%, and 5-5/9%.) Just before their report was completed, they considered the submitted papers to see if the grades should be reconsidered in view of the final contributions.

In committee Y, at some stage, a determination was made to keep grades the same. (I do not know the history of this determination.) During class, I observed that one Y member was an articulate, intelligent student--with somewhat romantic attitudes about student motivation. The Y paper was quite uneven; some parts were thorough and thoughtful, others skimpy and thin. I gave it a B grade. The intelligent romantic came over and seemed upset. She asked, "Could the committee grade division be changed?"

"Sure. If all the affected committee members agree in writing."

An immediate conference of committee members occurred. I heard her saying, with some intensity, that they'd implied she'd get an A. The committee came over, as a group, and asked what the effect of her A would be on the rest of them.

"Simple. All of your grades would be lowered proportionately."

We talked over the arithmetic. While each grade would only be lowered by one-fourth of a letter, a student still might have a problem, since the paper was only two-thirds of the grade, and a test, one-third; poor test showing might lower a student's grade by a whole letter.

The committee went off and conferred for five minutes. The protestant then came to with a note signed by all members, asking that she be given an A from their shares.

One other grade anecdote is pertinent. A student on a three member committee came to me towards the end of the term, and told me that he'd just discovered that the other two members were poor writers. The committee had assumed that grades were to be divided equally. What could he do? I suggested, 'Withdraw from the course."

"But then I'd waste a whole term's work."

"Offer to write the whole paper for all of them, if you believe you're such a good writer."

"That's too much work, and unfair."

"Just write your share."

"But then I'll get a poor grade."

"Offer to do more work, and ask for a larger share of the grade."

"But that'll be embarrassing. I'll have to criticize them, say I'm a better writer, and threaten to withdraw if I don't get my way."

I then told him the legend of Procustes and his bed. We both sort of laughed. We were walking beside the campus, and he offered to have a beer with me at a neighborhood bar. I said thanks, but at that moment I was busy. I went on, leaving him perplexed, but a little amused. When the papers were submitted a week later, his committee divided the grade 40-30-30. They submitted a pretty good paper.

IMPRESSIONS AND RUMINATIONS

The students work hard and occasionally feel uncomfortable and confused. Sometimes, especially towards the middle, I sense they resent the lack of more precise guidance from me. But in the end, most of them (that stay in the class) are gratified. Frankly, student gratification is not a crucial test. For better or worse, the problem given the class is consonant with issues typically handled by professionals in their work. I can understand why the students are ill-adapted to such difficult assignments, and uncomfortable. But they'll never learn more about doing such work while attending school--they have got to get in the water. I believe, the sooner the better. The course is a step in that direction. I think it's too bad they can't have a succession of such courses, and build on their first experiences.

Another thing I perceive is that the students attain a better sense of the real skills required to do professional-type jobs. Indeed, in selecting their topics, they sometimes manage to focus on work situations that relate to their vocational interests. They don't learn the skills required on these jobs, but they begin to see what they are composed of. They're permitted to peep out of the prison of adolescence that we have evolved for them, and get a look at the exciting, frustrating world.

Finally, my teaching has had to shift in empashis. How to PERT a group effort. How to conduct an interview. The theory of negotiations (relying on

an essay by Thomas Schelling). How to analyze an organization chart, or draft a group report. It's been demanding and satisfying for me as well as my students.